Practicing Dying

How Role-Playing Games Can Help Us Accept Death and Boost Our Quality of Life

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Introduction

In 2018, a life-threatening health scare that resulted in major surgery gave me the opportunity to directly experience how it feels to face one's own possible end. Among other things, I spent some time reflecting on how my play experience had prepared me for this real life one. In doing so, I was somewhat surprised to find that I had to a degree been playing out both the act of dying itself and a vast variety of situations and themes concerning death through play for years, in larps[1] such as among other, *Just A Little Lovin'* (2011), *Legion* (2015), and *Conscience* (2018). I will go into further detail about how these larps include themes of death and dying, and how the experience of playing them affected me later in this article. In the years following this experience I have gone on to create games such as *Hello in There* (2019) about old age, loneliness, and death, *Summer's End* (2022) about drug abuse and the death of a loved one, and *If I Could See Your Face Again* (2021) about the fear of losing a family member. I believe it is safe to say that death has influenced my design choices, and which themes I find it purposeful to explore through games.

In this article, I will seek to identify some connections between spirituality, game design, concepts of player/character interactions such as **immersion** (Bowman 2012), **alibi** and **bleed** (Bowman 2015; Hugaas 2019; Kemper 2017; 2020), and existing research and theory on how we deal with death. With regard to the latter, I will touch on concepts such as: the Death Anxiety Scale (Templer 1970), Death Acceptance (Ray/Najman 1974), the Death Attitude Profile (Gesser/Reker/Wong 1987–88), Erikson's theory of Psychosocial Development (Erikson 1950), the Death Drive or **Todestrieb** (Spielrein 1912; 1995; Freud

1 In larp academia, the preferred spelling of larp is lower-case. While it started as an acronym, it has become a commonplace word like radar, both in its noun form (a larp) and its verb form (to larp).

1922), and Jung's thoughts on different stages of life (Jung 2014). Given the restrictions of an article of this length, I can only touch on these concepts on a surface level, but I hope that my suggested connections can inspire readers to want to delve deeper, as I feel that this is a field where we can achieve many worthwhile insights in the years to come.

Using my own play experience and design work as a departure point, this article will explore how role-playing games can help facilitate growth and change in how we think about and prepare ourselves for our own inevitable deaths. I firmly believe that by conscientiously designing our games to increase their transformational potential, they can become powerful tools for change and self-development (Bowman/Hugaas 2019). Rituals revolving around death and dying have always been an important part of human spiritual and religious practices and symbolic enactment of ritual in games is a natural extension of these traditions (Rusch/Phelps 2020). Larps can provide low-risk opportunities to practice skills we can employ to deal more calmly and gracefully with our own mortality, while helping us build emotional and spiritual resiliency.

Being Alive Is a Temporary State

As fossil records are growing, biologists are still refining when exactly the first modern human, Homo sapiens, walked the earth. Currently there seems to be some agreement that our ancestral mother might have lived somewhat close to 300.000 years ago. Since then, as a species, we have evolved, developed, and changed in countless ways. Further change followed as technology, culture, religion and civilization itself became part of our story, eventually leading to our current globalized interconnected societies wherein almost eigth billion people lead their lives. Of all the thousands of thoughts, feelings, ideas, concepts and similar things that seem to be a shared part of the human experience, some have remained relatively unchanged from the very beginning. Among them we find things like the bonds of family, fear of the unknown, survival instincts, mating, and social connections and networks.

Of these few though, none might have been such an unending source of fuel for human mythmaking, spiritual exploration and just simple ceaseless wonder, as Death. Just as our ancient foremother all those millennia ago had a limited number of days, so will all of us. Then, when our days are spent, we will Pass Away, Part Ways, Pay the Ferryman, Face the Final Curtain, Step out of Time, Cease to Be, Wither Away, Kick the Bucket, Cross the Great Divide, and put on our Wooden Suit. To me, it is quite telling that even when talking about it, we are extremely reluctant to even call it by its name, seemingly fearing that the mere mention of the Eternal Rest might bring it to our doorsteps. The ancient (and current) practice of resorting to idioms – colourful ways of speaking of it without mentioning that of which we speak – stands as a testament to the respect for the potent and possibly destructive magical properties we tend to ascribe to all the things that surround it. As civilization has advanced, with its numerous technological and societal breakthroughs, Buying the Farm itself might have become less present, and a smaller part of the daily worries for many of us, yet and no matter how hard we try to push it to the back of our minds, one day it will no longer be denied. The inescapable truth remains that to be alive is a temporary state, and one day we will all have to take our Final Bow.

Fear the Reaper

Just like Death itself, fear of it seems to also have been a part of the human experience as long as we have been around. Many of the oldest preserved texts in the world show that it was an issue that was important in their contemporary settings. In *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (ca. 2100 BCE), the hero Gilgamesh has to learn to accept his own mortality after the death of Enkidu, his closest friend (and possible lover); *The Rigveda* (ca.1700 BCE) contains hymns to Yama, the god of death; and the *Book of the Dead* (ca. 1550 BCE) contains numerous spells to help and ensure safe passage into the afterlife. In short, numerous religious practices from cultures all over the world – among others ancient Egypt, ancient India, the Viking Age Nordics, pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, and Mesopotamia – all try to alleviate fear of death by offering up different versions of an afterlife. Conceptions of an afterlife are also commonly found in contemporary religious and spiritual practices.

Philosophy has also tried to address the issue for millennia. At the very brink of death (ca. 399 BCE), Socrates famously pontificated that there is no need to fear dying, as "no evil can happen to a good man, either in life or after death" (Plato 360 BCE). Continuing in this vein, in his *Letter to Menoeceus*, the Greek philosopher Epicurus delivers an argument as to why one should not fear death (300 BCE), and in his *Meditations*, the stoic philosopher and Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius did much the same (180 CE). Tackling the issue a little differently, Confucius (ca. 500 BCE) sought to soothe any fear of death by advocating for focusing on the solvable tasks of life rather than the mysteries of death (Confucius/Soothill 1910).

Death Anxiety

For centuries, religion and philosophy have both offered numerous ways of understanding and explaining death, and with the emergence of the field of psychology, many later great thinkers also dedicated much of their work to this old issue. In 1896, G. Stanley Hall's research showed that the fear of death was universal (Hall 1896). In psychology, the colloquial **fear of death** is often substituted with **death anxiety**, and the terms are used interchangeably. Robert Langs suggested that death anxiety could be divided into subcategories of predatory, predator, and existential anxiety (Langs 2004). Predator and predatory relate to being harmed by others and harming others, while existential anxiety is based on the awareness of one's own mortality. While the two first categories are important in their own right, it is this latter category that I seek to understand better in this article. The knowledge that all of us will die some day is the basis for existential death anxiety, and research has shown that it is the one of the three categories that is felt most strongly (Sterling 1985). In 1970, Daniel I. Templer proposed the **death anxiety scale** as a way of measuring the degree of anxiety a person feels when confronted with their own mortality. This scale has been revised and improved upon a number of times, and versions of it are applied within a number of fields.

Building on the earlier work of Sabina Spielrein (1912), Sigmund Freud theorized about the **death drive** or **thanatos** as a self-destructive force that existed in parallel with **eros**. But where **eros** is focused on avoiding the unpleasant in favour of pleasurable ex-

periences, **thanatos** is described as a need to seek out the unpleasant and pushes the individual towards acts of aggression, compulsive repetition of unpleasant/traumatic experiences, and self-destructive behaviour (Freud 1922). This ability to be in duality with oneself traces a clear line back through the centuries, from Carl Jung, to René Descartes and even William Shakespeare, all the way back to Plato, and probably beyond. We find this duality again when we combine Hall's and Sterling's mentioned works on the prevalence of death anxiety with Ernest Becker's book The Denial of Death, wherein he argues that humans develop intricate strategies to deny the awareness of our own mortality as a defense mechanism (Becker 1973). This paradox of our existential fear and our conscious strategies to deny the existence of what we fear have for millennia stood at the very centre of humanity's attempts to come to terms with the temporal nature of our existence.

It took Freud years, decades even, to completely come to terms with the dualistic existence of *thanatos*, while his contemporary Carl Gustav Jung seemed to embrace the idea quite willingly. In the 1930 essay "The Stages of Life," he went as far as to not only accept the existence of a drive towards the end, but also advocated for death as a place to find purpose, stating:

> As a doctor, I am convinced that it is hygienic – if I may use the word – to discover in death a goal toward which one can strive, and that shrinking away from it is something unhealthy and abnormal which robs the second half of life of its purpose. (Jung 2014)

Viewing death as a purposeful part of life goes far towards completing the circle back to the earlier spiritual and philosophical traditions mentioned previously in this article, and it seems clear that Jung himself was curious about the possibility of an afterlife, having for example studied the psychology of mediumship. Yet, this approach is not inherently dependent on the afterlife serving up some sort of reward for having led a moral life, but is rather based on the understanding that accepting one's own mortality is a way to increase the quality and enjoyment of the later stages of life. In Jung's thinking, such acceptance could be found through the process of **individuation**, in which aspects of a person's psyche, personality, experiences and similar get integrated into a (hopefully) well-functioning whole: an individual (Jung 1976). We find similar thoughts mirrored in Erik Erikson's theory of Psychosocial Development, where later stages of life contain some of the same understanding of acceptance of mortality as a way to increase one's quality of life. In the 8th stage, which concerns late adulthood, Erikson theorized that a person will exist in a flux between integrity and despair, as they weigh up the results of the life they lived. 'Did they accomplish enough? Were they happy? Do they leave a legacy?' To sum it up, Erikson poses the existential question: 'Is it okay to have been me?' (Erikson 1950) If the answer is yes, then a greater level of acceptance of the end, and therefore a greater quality of life, can be achieved. The process of integrating role-playing experiences into one's real life self is not dissimilar from either Jung's or Erikson's theories. Sometimes it might even offer an easier access to the parts of a person's experience in need of processing and a better structured process of integration into the self (Bowman/Hugaas 2019, 2021).

Continuing in this vein, and addressing the inherent notion that the opposite of death anxiety would be death acceptance, John Ray and Jackob M. Najman showed that

it was not only possible, but not even unusual to be able to both accept death and be anxious about it at the same time (Ray/Najman 1974). In other words, they are not opposites, and the absence of anxiety does not mean that one is in acceptance, once again landing us at a paradoxical crossroads. A similar paradox is found among those who are in denial of death, yet still fear it (Becker 1973). Building on the work to understand our attitudes towards our own mortality, Gina Gesser, Paul T. P. Wong, and Gary T. Reker introduced (1987–88), and later revised (1994) the **death attitude profile**, a method with which to measure a person's fear of death, and possible avoidance and acceptance of it. In all of these works, we clearly see a need to understand through quantifying these experiences, so that they become easier to measure and describe. Personally I believe that while this can be helpful, it is important to remind ourselves that there are certain human experiences that can not be reduced to hard numbers alone.

Above, I have just scratched the surface on work in the field, a small selection that points towards vast depths, if you will. What this shows is that humanity has gone to great lengths to try to understand, explain, measure, and structure the complex web of thoughts, actions, feelings, and behavior that revolves around fear of death. This huge library of theory and thinking, with all its deeply impressive contributions, might have moved practitioners in the field themselves towards a greater understanding of the issue, but has it made each and everyone of us better equipped to face our own end? To what degree is it even possible to intellectualize such a deeply ingrained embodied part of the human experience? For my part, I have found throughout life that there is a limit to how much insight about one's lived experience one can integrate with a purely theoretical or intellectual approach. The way I see it, life is an embodied experience, and I believe that embodied experiences often can be easier to understand through embodied practice. Larping is an example of such an embodied practice.

Facing My Own End

During the summer of 2018, as I was having to face my own mortality, many different feelings came up for me. Among them, there was of course both some frustration and resignation, but in general I was surprised at how at peace I felt. I was 39, and naturally I felt that there were many things that I had not gotten around to doing with my life, tasks and projects left undone, remaining answers to unearth to the existential question in Erikson's (1950) 7th stage of psychosocial development, generativity vs. stagnation: 'Can I make my life count?' Yet, all in all I found that I was quite content and had few problems accepting fairly quickly that at the end of the day life is what it is: finite. I guess you never really know how you would feel and act until you find yourself in a situation like this, but I have to admit that before my experience I would have thought that I would have reacted with greater amounts of anxiety and fear.

When you are instructed to stay at home and stay put as much as possible, you are awarded a lot of time to process and reflect on the things you have done in life so far. Among other things I found myself reflecting on the numerous role-playing experiences I had had, both ones where my own character had died and ones where characters close to mine passed away. As a result of my processing, several questions came up: 'Was it

possible that my play experience had prepared me for this real life experience? Had I unknowingly built up resilience and acceptance of death while immersing myself in the fictional lives of my characters? Had I to some degree been rehearsing, almost like an actor to a play, for this very situation?' Before we get further into the answers to these questions though, I believe that a brief overview of my role-playing experience might be helpful to the reader.

Nordic Larp

I have been active as a designer, theorist, organizer, writer and player in the Nordic larp tradition of live action role-playing for over 20 years. Nordic larp originated in the Nordic countries of Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland, which also explains the name itself (Stenros/Montola 2010). The tradition is heavily built on a collective understanding of role-playing as a collaborative creation practice and over the years a number of individuals have contributed to a comprehensive and freely shared collection of tools, theory, designs, and games. Designers who consider themselves part of the Nordic larp tradition tend to favor unobtrusive rules, and consent-based play, and in addition, tend to not shy away from deep engagement with heavy and psychologically and emotionally challenging narrative themes. Over the years, the tradition has grown to encompass a wide variety of play styles and settings. It has also been quite influential on other emerging similar traditions, most notably in other parts of Europe and in the US. It has to be noted though, that these other traditions have emerged in their own right and have all in different ways contributed to a freely shared global pool of knowledge. This movement has been instrumental in expanding the edges of the application of role-playing to new fields in the last couple of decades, among them education, political activism, personal development, and therapeutic practices (cf. Nordic Larp Wiki).

Going back to my musing at the time, I discovered, or rather remembered, that I as a player had in fact experienced themes of facing death and dying for years in various larps from these traditions. Participating in deeply **immersive** larps such as among others *1942* (2000; 2017), *Just A Little Lovin'* (2015; 2018), *Legion* (2016), and *Conscience* (2018), I had explored numerous aspects of both my own character's death and the death of characters close to mine. As I was now finding myself in a real life situation where questions concerning awareness and degrees of acceptance of my own mortality were being thrust upon me, I could quite consciously and easily tap into these experiences, which provided me with both perspective and a certain familiarity that would not otherwise have been available to me. In turn, I could face this crisis in my real life with a fairly calm composure, which I now firmly believe was in part awarded to me from my experiences in fictional settings.

Alibi

When we role-play, we embody a character that is not our everyday self. The character might be either quite similar or quite different (or both) to whom we perceive ourselves

to be, but the important point is that within the setting of the game, we all agree to the premise that we are not interacting with others as ourselves. While role-playing, the permission we grant each other to act without being held accountable as our everyday selves is called **alibi**. Deterding defines alibi "as a motivational account… that deflects negative inference from displayed behavior to a person's identity" (2018: 268) In regards to role-playing, we recognize alibi when we hear statements such as 'I just did what my character would do' or 'That was not me, it was my character.'

In the vein of Shakespeare's (1623) famous quote in *As You Like It*, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players" (Act II Scene VII Line 139), Erving Goffman postulates that we always present, or perform versions of ourselves based on which specific social **frame** we are currently performing in (Goffman 1959). This theory opens us up to an understanding of identity as a much more fluid concept than we are accustomed to seeing it as. As a matter of fact, Goffman posits that acting and other preformed interactions in our daily lives rely on the same basic skill set, even if actors refine those skills through training:

> A character staged in a theater is not in some ways real, nor does it have the same kind of real consequences as does the thoroughly contrived character performed by a confidence [or con] man; but the successful staging of either of these types of false figures involves use of real techniques – the same techniques by which everyday persons sustain their real social situations. (ibid: 10)

This overlap between player identity and character enactment has also been explored in neuroscience. In 2019, the first neuroimaging study of dramatic enactment was performed, studying actors trained in the Stanislavski method of acting, which found that portraying a character led to both general reductions in brain activity and de-activation of specific areas of the brain (Brown et. al. 2019). That the actors were trained in the Stanislavski method is noteworthy, as this specific method of acting encompasses a range of techniques and philosophies that are common, even prevalent in certain role-playing traditions, Nordic larp being one of these. For example, modern actors following their version of the method often deeply immerse themselves into character, just as Nordic larpers do, especially in the Finnish tradition (cf. Pohjola 2004). It is also a noteworthy point that the imaging was not performed while the actors were acting out lines or any other form of pre-written text, but rather when they were answering questions as their character. In other words, while they were role-playing. In many ways, the technique they used is very similar to the established and commonly applied pre-game role-playing technique hot seat, where players take turns (in the hot seat), answering quick fire questions from the other players as their character (cf. Stark 2013). The theory Brown et al. suggested as a result of their study was that embodying a character leads to a certain 'loss of self,' which implies that we do not rigidly hang on to our perceived identity when we engage in role-playing. So, while it has so far been beyond our reach to exactly pin down where identity is mapped in our neurological system, this research clearly supports the idea that role-playing is in fact an altered state of consciousness (cf. Hugaas 2018; 2019).

When considering alibi and Goffman's concept of the social presentation of self within given frames, we are faced with the following question: What is the significant, if any, difference between embodying a character that is close to our perceived identity and performing a version of ourselves based on the specific social frame we are in? When merging this with the findings from the study conducted by Brown et al., we can further ask: What effect does the observed 'loss of self' in a role-playing setting have on our mind's ability to clearly distinguish between the two? And ultimately: How can a stable sense of 'self' be created when considering the malleability of our consciousness? Is it even possible?

Immersion

One of the more elusive concepts in role-playing theory is **Immersion** (Bowman 2012). In short, as with many embodied experiences, it tends to be something that we recognize immediately when we experience it (when we feel immersed), but then on the other hand tends to elude us when we try explaining it to others afterwards:

> Immersion is not a phenomenon limited to game play. Rather, immersion is a fundamental state of human consciousness taking many forms and encompassing a variety of experiences with distinct cognitive and emotional processes. Despite this plurality, all immersion arises from some form of psychological motivation to engage with certain stimuli. (Bowman 2018: 380)

In 2016, Sarah Lynne Bowman and Andhe Standiford published a suggested categorization of different types of immersion into an analog play experience. Parallel to their work on this, Gordon Calleja had suggested a categorization for digital games that roughly corresponds to Bowman's and Standiford's structure (Calleja 2011). Their categorization for analog games included the following: Immersion into **activity**, into **game**, into **environment**, into **narrative**, into **character**, and into **community** (Bowman/Standiford 2016). In relation to this article, immersion into narrative and character are particularly relevant.

In regards to role-playing games, immersion into character might seem fairly self-explanatory. When role-playing, immersing yourself into the character, taking on their different aspects, ideas, mannerism, and even emotions, is the very core of the activity itself. Of course, there are no distinct hard lines, but in several ways, the immersion into character is in theory what separates role-playing from several traditions of acting. Where for instance acting tends to be heavily reliant on the use of prewritten scripts, role-playing is not, making the depth of immersion into character that follows spontaneous co-creation and reactive embodiment of character easier to achieve. It is important to note though, that this type of immersion is exactly what the above mentioned study by Brown et al. (2019) describes on a neurological level, thereby adding further weight to the argument that method acting and immersive role-playing are closer linked than one might previously have thought. The main limitation to making this connection, is how

the study applied the aforementioned improvisational hot seat technique rather than having the actors act out a pre-written script.

Immersion into narrative happens when we engage deeply with the story that we are part of telling. With regards to practicing social skills through role-play, narrative immersion provides us with the scaffolding we need to make the in-game experience recognizable to our real world selves. In other words, if the story does not resonate with the players, we can get disinterested or disconnected from the experience, and it becomes harder to integrate it into our lives after the game ends (Bowman/Hugaas 2021). In addition, there are several theories around how narrative is an important part of how we construct our identities. For instance, the theory of narrative identity first partly proposed by Dan McAdams (McAdams 1985) states that we tend to weave and integrate important experiences we have into a structured story about our lives. By making what is for most of us a vastly complex and mostly non-coherent experience of life into a structured narrated story, people experience a greater sense of purpose, unity, and a more consistent concept of self (McAdams 2011).

When researching the psychology of narrative experiences, one of the main processes in which audiences interact with fictional characters is identification. Through the process of identification, people can take on the first-person perspective of the fictional character whose narrative they are watching (Oatley 1999). This is similar to what one experiences when one immerses into character while role-playing. If anything, one can argue that the added conscious alibi of role-playing could be expected to facilitate greater merging of the characters' experiences into the player than could be expected from the more distanced, less embodied perspective that people inhabit when engaging with traditional media. The shared role-playing activity gives us permission to identify with the character on a first-person level to a depth that could be perceived as socially problematic/unacceptable if one did so from the point of view of an audience member.

In 2021, a neuroimaging study of fans of the TV series *Game of Thrones*, while studying the process of identification, found neural overlap that might explain it. In their findings, they state:

> These results suggest that identification with fictional characters leads people to incorporate these characters into their self-concept: the greater the immersion into experiences of 'becoming' characters, the more accessing knowledge about characters resembles accessing knowledge about the self. (Broom et. al. 2021: 541)

In other words, what happens to our characters, also happens to us, not only in the moment, but also when we in retrospect try to access our memories. When we take into account the similarity between identification and immersion into character when role-playing, it leads us to understand that what we experience as characters when we role-play do inform our real life identity also after the game ends.

Bleed

A widely reported experience when role-playing is how emotions, feelings, physical states, opinions, thoughts, and other states 'spill over' from player to character, or vice versa. For instance, if you are playing a character that is in love with another character, you might as a player experience similar attraction to the other player after the game ends (Harder 2018). Another example is how you as a player might hold a strong ethical conviction, for instance pacifism, that leads to your warrior character being unable to enact violence in a way they would be accustomed to and expected to do. This transfer of a variety of states between player and character is a phenomenon that is known as bleed (Montola 2010). When the phenomenon of bleed travels in the direction from character to player, as in the example of the player adopting the romantic attraction of the character, we call it bleed-out, and when it goes the opposite way, as in the example of the character adopting the pacifist philosophy of the player, we call it bleed-in. For the sake of this article, I am talking about bleed with regards to analog role-playing, but it is also found in digital games. Even in single player games with little to no free creative input and no co-created or player-created content, bleed still seems to happen (Waern 2010). Can we then even begin to imagine the potential potency of bleed when we ourselves are the creators of our game world, our narratives, our relationships, and our characters?

Over the years, a variety of categories of bleed have been suggested, such as:

- Emotional bleed (Montola 2010; Bowman 2015), where emotional states and feelings bleed between player and character.
- Ego bleed (Beltrán 2013), where aspects of personality and identity bleed between player and character.
- Procedural bleed (Hugaas 2019), where physical abilities, traits, habits, and other bodily states bleed between player and character.
- Memetic bleed (Hugaas 2019), where ideas, thoughts, opinions, convictions, ideologies and similar bleed between player and character.
- Emancipatory bleed (Kemper 2017; 2020), where players from marginalized backgrounds experience liberation from that marginalization through their characters. Players can choose to steer toward such liberatory experiences as a means to challenge structural oppression.

As we can see, through bleed and other phenomena, role-playing is believed to have the potential to affect more or less every part of our emotional, cognitive, and even physical being. In relation to death anxiety, which is known to have emotional, behavioral, somatic and cognitive components, it is safe to say that the activity of role-playing has the potential to cover all of these areas to a degree. In other words, when we experience something in character, it can affect us as players in a number of ways. Thus, it stands to reason that specific subcategories of bleed have the potential to affect us in ways that address components of our fear of dying. Of course, it is not as simple in practice, but in general we can say that emotional bleed relates to the emotional parts of anxiety, memetic bleed to the behavioral parts, and procedural to somatic parts.

The Transformational Potential of Role-Playing Games

Over the years, I and others who seek to explore and understand the transformational potential of role-playing games, have informally gathered hundreds of stories from players who report to have experienced profound transformation through games. In 2019, Sarah Lynne Bowman and I proposed a categorization of such reported impacts, and I present them here without the (numerous) sub-categories:

(1) Emotional Processing
(2) Social Cohesion
(3) Educational Goals
(4) Political Aims

With regards to anxiety and/or acceptance of death, the first category (Emotional processing) clearly plays an important part, but there are aspects in all the categories that together play into the processing around these themes. For example, when it comes to play centered around death and dying through role-playing, players can among other things practice grieving the loss of a loved one, reframe past experiences, recognize fears of things like death and abandonment, explore aspects of their personal experience, experience being witnessed, learn to hold space, and learn perspective taking.

As we seek to immerse into a play experience, we regularly have to employ a certain level of pretending that things are different than we rationally know them to be (Pohjola 2004). It can be as easy as accepting that these two chairs in your living room are actually the front seats in a car and you are now cruising down a road, headed for unknown adventure. When we pretend that one object is something else, most likely as they share some sort of similarity – in this case, chairs and car seats – we refer to it as **iconic representation**. This representation of one object as something else can be seen as the most basic form of **symbolic enactment.** On the other end of this scale, where mere physical placeholding gives place to abstract constructs, we find **indexical** symbolic enactment. (Rusch/Phelps 2020)

> Indexical symbolic action can therefore be understood as a process of projecting salient aspects of an internal landscape outward, manifesting them through physical gestures and objects that represent something otherwise abstract. The tangible, symbolic manifestation of elusive ideas now allows their manipulation in a manner that the unconscious accepts authentically as 'real.' 'As if' becomes 'as.' This can have powerfully transformative effects on the performer's inner world. (Rusch/Phelps 2020)

Following symbolic enactment, in order to maximize the potential for transformative impacts to occur, the implementation of **integration** practices is essential (Bowman/Hugaas 2019). By this we mean practices that are consciously designed to facilitate for players to integrate the experiences they have had within the frame of the game into their real life concept of self and the frames of their daily lives. For a deeper read into this categorization and the importance of integration of play experiences, I refer

to our article "Transformative Role-play: Design, Implementation, and Integration." (Bowman/Hugaas 2019) For my part, knowledge of the transformational potential of role-playing has deeply informed both my play and my design practice.

How I have Practiced Dying

In the years leading up to my health scare, I played a lot of different larps, all across a wide variety of settings and themes. At the time, I did not consciously seek out games whose themes revolved around death and fear of death, but somehow I seem to have touched on the theme on a number of occasions, and I present a small selection here.

Just a Little Lovin' (Edland/Grasmo 2011)

In 2015 I played the Nordic larp Just a Little Lovin' for the first time. The larp is set in upstate New York in the early '80s, and revolves around a community of LGBTQ+ characters from New York City during the first years of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and a community of cancer survivors with whom they are interconnected. The game is divided into three acts, set in 1982, 1983 and 1984, and unless your character passes away between the acts, you will play a 3 year stretch of their life.

The larp's handling of questions of queerness, sex, and the party culture of the 1980s is often referred to first when people discuss it. However, as one of the games original designers, Hanne Grasmo, points out in her 2017 talk "Larp and I –Till Death Do Us Part," the motivation for creating it was different; "*Just a Little Lovin*' was for me a lot more about the fear of death, than about sex, friendship, and the 1980s. That's why I wrote it. That's why I played it. The reason: I am scared.. to death.., by the thought of my own exit from life" (Grasmo 2017). The second act of the game is even titled 'Fear of Death,' clearly showcasing the creators' intent, and also signaling to the players what the experience of playing the game will be like. Grasmo's talk was part of the annual Nordic Larp Talks, a series of lectures concerning avant garde projects and ideas stemming from the Nordic larp tradition.

My character, the go-go dancer, adult movie actor and sugar baby Chain, led a life of high risk in regards to contracting the HIV virus, which he also did in late 1982. Without going into some of the larp's mechanics that I believe should remain unexplained in detail for future players of the game, I got to play out my potential death in an embodied fashion that included connections to my own emotions, my community, and my own cognitive fear of death. In short, it was a profoundly immersive experience. This scene where I got to enact the character's potential death is one of the clearest examples of a collection of indexical symbolic enactments (Rusch/Phelps 2020) that I can recall ever having experienced. The added layer of being in character led to the fascinating experience of both character and player having a profound feeling of being reborn, and we both went on to enact change in our lives as a result of it.

The summer of 2018, I played the game again, this time with a different character: the wealthy middle aged community hub Terrence 'Mr. T' Thurlow. This character's lifestyle was one of lower risk than my first character, yet he had more to lose. Where my

first character was young, individually minded, and focused on instant gratification, my second character was older, community minded, and preoccupied with legacy, with leaving something behind. I went into the game thinking that it would be difficult for me to have the same profound experience as the first time, but I was mistaken. My character did end up contracting the HIV virus in 1984, and spent the last evening having to come to terms with his own mortality.

The two experiences, different as they might be, both influenced my processing around my own mortality on a profound level. When I was going through my own health issue, I kept returning to thinking about my experiences, and I found that they gave me peace of mind.

Conscience

In February of 2018, I played the larp *Conscience* (Montero et. al. 2018), a game loosely based on the premise of the TV show *Westworld* (Nolan et al. 2017) The setting was a 'Wild West town' amusement park, where wealthy people could come and live out their fantasies of being either white hat heroes or black hat villains in a fictional American western town in the 1800s. The characters that were people of the town were all androids (albeit played by human role-players), so within the fiction they were simply machines that the human characters could potentially treat as in-humanely as they wished. As follows the setting, the large questions that the players were asked to ponder went along the lines of: 'What makes us human? How do we treat those who we perceive as less human than ourselves? How do we engage with our own mortality and the mortality of others?' The last part was informed by how the android characters, although their minds were erased regularly, were in theory immortal, while the human characters were of course not.

My character, the sadistic football star Jamie King, was definitely a villain: a spoiled, bored, and wealthy young man that had known nothing but privilege his whole life. As such, he treated the android characters to all manners of abuse. Not to spoil too much of the story, but of course the android characters do achieve consciousness towards the end of the game, and there is a reckoning. My character did not survive, and as I lay there dying, a death that at least for my character was very well deserved, I to my surprise found that he was clearly not afraid. Not afraid at all.

Yes, he was a bad man, but he had lived every moment with a clear purpose and he always knew what he wanted in life. In short, he had no regrets, he had made his impression on the world, done what he wanted to do, and achieved the things he had set out to achieve. Clearly, this man's actions were not something to emulate, but in retrospect I found that parts of how he had approached life might be. I was reminded again of Erikson's (1950) stages of psychosocial development, this time of the 8th stage, the one of reflection, where one is in flux between integrity and despair, ultimately posing the question: 'Is it okay to have been me?' Having read this theory, I have words to describe my experience, but the knowledge itself did little to create a real embodied understanding of what leads to satisfaction at the end of life. To me, embodying this character over a long weekend led to a level of internalization of this knowledge that years of thinking about it had failed to produce.

Legion

In 2016, I played the larp Legion (Rolling 2015), which is set in 1917 just as Russia had withdrawn from WW1. The setting of this historical game is how the Czech legion, who had until then fought as a unit in the Russian army, find themselves removed from the fighting and at odds with the new rulers of Russia. The legion had joined the fight on the Allied side in order to gain Czech independence from Austria-Hungary, and had little reason to join the ideological fight of the new communist powers in Moscow. The game revolves around how the legion (which it historically actually did), decides to travel east and around the globe in order to reach their Czech homeland, fighting both the bolshevik Reds and the tsarist Whites on their journey there.

My character was a second lieutenant, a professional soldier of many years, and a seasoned leader of his men. In his pocket, he carried the letters of his brothers-in-arms, as they carried letters of his, to bring back home if any of them should fail to make it. He was very much used to being surrounded by death, be it the death of his own men or his enemies, and he knew that any doubt or hesitation on his part would lead rather to the former, than to the latter. He knew that he was most likely not going to survive the war, but he found purpose in caring for his men and doing his best to keep them safe, if even just for an hour at a time.

This complete understanding of his own purpose and what actions he needed to take to fulfill it, gave the character the same sort of acceptance of death as I described earlier with regards to my character at Conscience.

Integrating My Play Experiences

In retrospect, I have clearly integrated parts of the above-mentioned experiences in my life going forward from them. The experiences I had at Just A Little Lovin' have helped me realize that I should not postpone the things I want to do in life, as none of us know how much time we get. As such, they have informed many decisions I have taken, which in turn has helped me live a life more full of great and purposeful experiences, such as travel, connecting with friends, building community, and exploring further into philosophy and spirituality. I did play the game again in 2019, this time playing the character of Kohana, a spiritual guide, masculinity coach, and healer. To me, it felt like I had completed a circle, and could come back to this experience not needing to explore my mortality, but having already faced it, and thus being able to help others in their time of need.

I have always been a caretaker and a guardian of those I care about, but rarely have I been able to experience the deepening of this character trait of mine so clearly as I did when coming back to the game to play Kohana. When I combined this experience with how my character at Legion found deep purpose in taking care of and protecting his people in the middle of a war, I realized how important the caretaker and guardian roles are to me in my real life. As a result of these experiences, I am now more conscious about how doing this work in the real world is helping me feel that I am living a purposeful and fulfilling life.

The calmness with which my characters in Legion and Conscience could face their end, had a profound impact on how I dealt with having to face my own. To me it was telling how two such vastly different characters could share a stoic calmness at the end of life, and although there was not much for me to learn from their actions, the sincerity with which they acted has informed how I go about acting in my own life.

Most profoundly life changing of all was how my experiences made me truly internalize how life is what we make of it, and that we all have a limited number of days. For years before my real life crisis and some of the role-playing experiences I have described, the understanding that I was to go through life quite alone had solidified in me. Although love was abundant in many ways and forms in my life, the life partner that I felt could truly understand and complete me had always been an elusive prospect. Or rather, I felt that I had met her back in 2015 (the first time I played Just A Little Lovin' in fact), but she lived on the other side of the world and there were challenges both numerous and large that made a life together seem like little more than a romantic pipe dream.

The very first thing I did when I woke from my surgery was to let her know that it was successful, that I would be around for quite some time still, that I wanted us to commit fully to a life together, and that for any challenge we faced we would find all the solutions we needed. Sarah is now my wife, and my life has improved in more ways than I could ever imagine. I am truly certain that my real life experience in itself would not have proven enough for me to internalize the knowledge of what one needs to do in order to face the end with acceptance and contentment. For me to make the leap I needed to make in order to be truly happy, the role-playing experiences I have mentioned were instrumental and I am forever grateful that I got the opportunity to have them.

How My Experience Informs My Work as a Designer

Since my life-threatening experience, themes involving death and loss have become a more significant part of my designs. Death as a theme especially permeates the chamber larps/freeform scenarios I design, as I am most often the sole designer on these, yet it does inform how I approach larger collaborative projects too.

The Norwegian Prine Trilogy

I started writing the chamber larp *Hello in There* (2019) while I was recovering from my major surgery in 2018. It is a game in the Nordic larp tradition designed for 6–10 players, which premiered at the Spillerom convention in Trondheim in 2019. This game became my first attempt at specifically processing both the complex thoughts that arose around my own mortality, but also the loss of the last 3 of my grandparents in the course of a 12 month period in 2015–2016. We follow the playable characters as romantic couples over a period of 50 years, as they age and eventually pass away from an unspecified cause. Attempting to create an experience that encompasses an entire life, there are scenes depicting young love, the friendships of early adulthood, the departure of grown children, the onsetting loneliness of old age, and the passing of old friends and lovers.

The game was the first in an ongoing trilogy of freeform black box scenarios that touch very specifically on death and loss. I am currently putting the finishing touches on the next installment in the series, a game that specifically deals with addiction and the loss of a family member to substance abuse. Staying with the inspirational background for the first game, a song by American singer John Prine (Prine 1971), this upcoming game is named in the same tradition: *Summer's End* (Prine 2018). The trilogy is planned to conclude sometime in 2022–2023 with *The Great Compromise* (Prine 1972), a game about patriotism and death as a result of strife and war (Hugaas 2021).

In *Summer's End*, we follow a family torn apart and isolated by the global pandemic. One of the family members (decided during pre-game workshops) is isolated at the family's lakeside cottage, a place that carries vivid and important memories for all of them. This family member also went through a severe accident some time back, and as a result they are dependent on prescription painkillers to get through their day. From there, the story goes on to touch on themes of loneliness, addiction, and death.

The Great Compromise is in early stages of development, but as one might gather, it too follows the same thematic arc as the two previous ones of the trilogy. Together, these games represent a conscientious attempt at using bleed intentionally as a tool to facilitate for transformative impacts on a personal level, with specific regards to tackling issues of death anxiety and acceptance in the following ways:

- Through the experience of emotional bleed, the players may among other things explore aspects of self and others, process grief, experience belonging, practice empathy, explore intimacy, learn to recognize fears, and feel witnessed.
- Through the experience of memetic bleed, the players may among other things experience raised awareness, expand their worldview, practice rhetoric, practice problem solving, and learn to challenge default assumptions.
- Through the experience of procedural bleed, the players may among other things, practice perspective taking, practice empathy, and build confidence. (Bowman/Hugaas 2019)

An example might be a player like myself having recently lost a grandparent, experiencing the perspective of an elderly person facing death who felt a strong sense of belonging with their in-game spouse. The loss of their own character's life and the life of their in-game spouse might help them not only prepare for their own death in daily life, but also to process existing grief from their recent personal loss. For instance, in a funeral scene the player might feel witnessed in their grief in a way that might so far have been lacking in their real life.

Another example might be how a player who has not experienced any sort of health issues in their life, can gain perspective and practice empathy for others who have not been so fortunate. With regards to this trilogy of games, I think that players who have not felt the impact of drug addiction in their family might gain some nuance beyond the typical political message that drug use is merely a question of moral strength. In short, these games are designed to invite the players to reflect and process their thoughts and feelings around their own mortality and what they find important in life. Hopefully they can also take away insights that will be beneficial to their own lives going forward.

John Prine passed away from Covid-19 in April 2020, adding a layer of bittersweet and poignant profundity to these songs and the larps that they inspired. I am forever grateful for how his talent for writing and performing have added to my life and the lives of countless others.

The Mountain/If I Could See Your Face Again

Together with Dutch game designer Karijn van der Heij, I am currently designing the sister games The Mountain and If I Could See Your Face Again„ both inspired by songs of the same name by Steve Earle (1999; 2020). If I Could See Your Face Again is the shorter freeform scenario version of the weekend long Nordic larp The Mountain, and they both revolve around the small West Virginia mining town of Norton's Gully during a time of crisis. The background story is how the tiny community reacts to an accident that leaves a skeleton crew of miners caught underground and the rescue operation that gets set in motion to save them. While *The Mountain* is still in fairly early development, *If I Could See Your Face Again* premiered at the Stockholm Scenario Festival in November 2021.

The trapped miners are not playable characters, but the players have to navigate how to deal with seeing their loved ones trapped in a potentially deadly situation with little to no hope of getting out. The two games seek to explore how much of our reasons for living and purpose in life we tend to find in connection with others. For me, this is a clear continuation of what I explored in *Hello In There*, with a more dramatic and acute situation and the affected characters being younger and less prepared for the inevitability of their own mortality. Feedback from players of the first runs of *If I Could See Your Face Again* were generally very positive, with several emphasizing how the wait for hearing news between the acts was the most emotionally engaging and draining. To me, it speaks to how uncertainty about the outcome often can be worse than knowing, meaning that fear of losing someone can be felt just as strongly as actually losing them.

The Good Life at the End of the Road

Since the very beginning, humanity has pursued the elusive answer to the question of what makes for a 'good life'. The feeling of somehow not being able to check the necessary boxes before our time is up seems to be the main fuel for an existential fear of death and dying. To counter this fear some offer continued existence after passing, be it in an afterlife or as part of a collective unconscious spirit. Some offer peace through philosophical and spiritual practices, and others again seem to think that simple denial is the best way to handle it. I will not attempt a definite answer to this question myself, but it does seem to me that a life well lived contains aspects of facing and accepting one's own mortality, feelings of having found and pursued one's true purpose in life, the ability to direct one's path with agency and integrity, and having cultivated deep and meaningful connections with others. To me, it is clear that to achieve any of these, the ability to identify and transform both internal and external central parts of one's lived experience is required. To me, role-playing offers opportunities to develop these abilities better than any other concept I have encountered so far in life.

Research seems to slowly be catching up to what players have been reporting for years: that role-playing games can have profound transformative effects on deeply personal levels. With the contribution from everything from neuroimaging to connecting role-play theory with established psychology, we are starting to complete parts of the picture of how we can use role-playing to both help us make sense of our own lived experiences, and also prepare us for future experiences, thus better enabling us to achieve those elusive aspects of the 'good life.'

For my own part, it is clear to me that my experiences as a player did prepare me for the health crisis that I went through in 2018. It is also clear that the processing that I have been able to do through game design after this event has been instrumental in further lessening my fear of dying, bolstering my acceptance of my own mortality, and fundamentally adding a lot to my general experienced quality of life. It has helped me make better choices that are more aligned with my own sense of integrity and my own needs, helped me identify what I find valuable and purposeful in life, and allowed me to substantially deepen my connections with others. In short, it has helped me steer myself towards what I will consider a life well lived when my time comes.

I believe that the way larps so far have been used to provide low-risk opportunities to practice skills we can employ to deal more calmly and gracefully with our own mortality, while helping us build emotional and spiritual resilience, is merely the beginning. If we choose to consciously use the knowledge and experience we have accumulated, we can further develop role-playing games into powerful tools for transforming ourselves, our communities and our world for the better.

Myself, I can hardly imagine a life better lived than one in service of such transformations.

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